

### Sport in foreign policy: issues, challenges and opportunities

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ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy

## Sport in Foreign Policy

Issues, Challenges and Opportunities

Joseph Maguire

## Foreword

“Foreign policy and global sport has to wrestle with the broader question of how the nation-state formulates its approach based on a more *realpolitik* or ethically based approach” states the author Joseph Maguire in this article.

What kind of challenges and opportunities does global sport have for the nation-states? What characterises global sport today? What responsibility do nation-states have in mega event bidding processes? Which impacts does global sport have within and between societies?

Joseph Maguire gives a short overview in this article about the interconnection between sport, foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. It is part of the research project “Sport, Culture and Foreign Policy: Opportunities and Challenges” within ifa’s Research Programme “Culture and Foreign Policy”. The article gives an outlook to the EUNIC yearbook 2016, which comprises different views on the topic sport in foreign policy. I would like to thank Joseph Maguire for his excellent work and his commitment to this project.

In December 2014 experts from culture, politics and science discussed those questions at the ifa-conference “Sport in Foreign Policy” in Brussels. The results of this conference are summarized in a conference report by Julia Hass published on the ifa-website.

EUNIC is the network of the European National Institutes for Culture. Formed in 2006, EUNIC has 34 members from 28 countries and 95 clusters based in different locations around the globe. EUNIC’s members work in over 150 countries with over 2,000 branches and thousands of local partners.

In today’s fragmented and much interdependent world, sport can be a social, cultural and political force; thus an important instrument in foreign cultural relations to strengthen intercultural dialogue, to foster cultural diplomacy and culture for development and peace resolution work.

**Ronald Grätz**

Secretary General, ifa

## **Sport in foreign policy: issues, challenges and opportunities**

Modern sport emerged out of its European homeland in the mid to late nineteenth century. Diffusing along the lines of Empire, sport spread to all parts of the globe. Bound up in a resurgence of nationalism and nation-state rivalries, international sport competition was marked from this beginning with complex foreign policy implications and concerns. With the rebirth of the Olympic Games in 1896, a range of “patriot games” were evident. In contrast to this explicit connection between sport and nationalism, the Olympic movement claimed an ability to fulfil a broader role of enhancing intercultural communication and fostering goodwill across nations—in part, by drawing inspiration from Hellenism and aspects of the British public school ethos. During the course of the twentieth century these seemingly paradoxical features—nationalism and universalism—characterised global sport. At various times, nation-states have implicitly or explicitly been faced with and have taken advantage of a range of foreign policy concerns and opportunities via sport. Sport has been used variously as a social glue, a factor in nation-building, a projection of “soft power” and a form of cultural diplomacy—especially in the Cold War period. Less well-known is the use that global sport has been put to in spying and intelligence gathering.

### **Structure and practice of global sport**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the enlarged EU, across Europe as a whole, or in the wider world, nation-states now grapple with problems that go beyond the traditional boundaries of the nation and have become transnational in nature and global in range. With the realignment of the nation-state, through which sovereignty is sometimes shared, diluted and pooled, and boundaries have become more porous, foreign policy practitioners are now required to be more sensitive to, and adept at handling, these concerns that surface across a range of cultural and social flows—including global sport.

Yet, several concerns characterise the structure and practice of global sport. These include: questions of governance, democracy and transparency; the bidding for, hosting of, and claims made regarding the legacy flowing from the staging of mega-events and nation-building; processes of migration, identity politics, and the movement of both highly-skilled and vulnerable bodies (e. g. elite athletes and child trafficking); and sport, development strategies, conflict resolution, peace building and global health concerns an

UN Millennium goals. In each of these areas, complex questions of policy arise concerning the formulation and projection of “soft power”, the image of the nation and the interplay between sporting politics, and politics and sport. Fundamentally, consideration of the relationship between foreign policy and global sport has to wrestle with the broader question of how the nation-state formulates its approach based on a more *realpolitik* or ethically based approach to the problems outlined.

### **Interconnection between sport, foreign policy and cultural diplomacy**

Several key issues can thus be identified that highlight the interconnections between sport, foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. Let us first consider the links between sport, leisure and culture. For better, and worse, modern sport is part of the cultural fabric of advanced industrial societies. Irrespective of questions of high or popular culture, modern sport is part of the body style practices and cultural choices of people in civic society. These practices are, nevertheless, contoured and shaped by gender, class, ethnic and other fault lines of societies. They are also patterned by the actions of nation-states, by both the domestic and the foreign policy objectives pursued and the cultural strategies adopted. The bidding for and claims legacy of hosting mega-events is a case in point.

Secondly, this state of affairs is nothing new. Two interconnected processes, as noted above, underpinned the emergence and global diffusion of sport in the late nineteenth century: nationalism and internationalism. The anthem, the emblem and the flag was as much part of cultural ceremonies of global sport as were the claims made for the power of the modern Olympics to spread a message of internationalism. Then, as now, new nations would seek to join the IOC and FIFA as well as the League of Nations or the United Nations. In the context of multi-sport events such as the Olympic Games inter-state relations were being exercised – albeit in a less sophisticated way than now. A prime example of how sport, cultural diplomacy and foreign policy intertwined was in the context of the formation of the British Empire Games (BEG). Held, for the first time, in Hamilton, Canada, in 1930, the British Empire Games sought to tie the economic, political and cultural ties of the Empire together. By way of illustration consider the involvement of Irish athletes in this inaugural games. Their participation evoked issues of national and cultural identity and were interwoven with questions concerning the organisation of sport on a pan-Ireland basis and the allegiance of teams in international competition. The Irish Free State (IFS) had been established in 1922, though six counties of Ireland had remained part of the United Kingdom (UK). This territory was to become known as Northern Ireland. In the following period, culminating in the establishment of the Irish/Eire Constitution (1937), several amendments were made to IFS laws that removed reference to

an oath of allegiance to the British crown and severed links to UK jurisdiction, but crucially maintained that “the whole island of Ireland its islands and the territorial seas” formed a single “national territory”. Despite this context, and the related tension that emerged around “Irish” involvement in the Olympic Games at that time, “Ireland” participated both in the inaugural BEG in 1930 and also in 1934, but by 1938 only Northern Ireland was involved. Significantly, the BEG were replete with the pageantry of the Empire and with athletes swearing allegiance to the crown. Participation in the BEG highlights the role of sport in constructing different ideas of what it means to be Irish during a period which was characterised by palpable resistance to participation in English or British sports teams and political separation. The Games of the 1930’s also reflected much of the politics of the then waning Empire – soft and hard power aspects of foreign policy were interwoven.

Yet, over time, as that Empire faded away, the Games have remained, though its title has changed, currently called the Commonwealth Games. While former colonies are now independent states and the economic links between Commonwealth nations and the “Mother Country” have lessened, the cultural links have remained and are viewed as part of the social cement that ties this disparate group of people together. In this sense, these sportive ties are yet another example of soft power.

In light of this example a third point can be made. That is, sport, both within society and in inter-state/cross cultural/civilizational relations, can take two broad overlapping forms. Sport has not some trans-historical essence. Rather, it is a form of social capital – that has both dark and light forms. Sport acts as social glue – bringing people of a society or across societies together. Sport then, can act as a global village. This can be done by the actions of athletes such as Muhammad Ali or by the collective sense of loss and grief prompted by the death of the Australian cricketer Phillip Hughes in late 2014. In this sense sport can cross borders and forms a global idiom in which intercultural relations are enhanced. Yet, sport can also act as a social toxic – prompting outbursts of nationalism, cheating, state sponsored doping, corruption and the exploitation of people from emerging nations – as athletes and workers – and the exploitation of the environment – on sea, land and air. Sport then, acts as a form of global pillage.

A final point can be made that relates to this issue of forms of social capital, of global village and global pillage. Here, consideration can be given to elite sport labour migration and mega event bidding and how those involved in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, can adopt a stance that ranges from a classical *realpolitik* to a more ethically based approach. As part of the sports medical industrial complex (SMIC) states increasingly utilise all relevant national resources in order to guarantee success in

international competition. International sporting success thus involves a contest between systems involving the availability and identification of human resources; methods of coaching and training; the efficiency of particular sports organisations and the depth of knowledge of sports medicine and sports sciences. The development of a sport within a particular society also depends on the status of that society in the international rank order of specific sports. Less developed African nations, for example, tend to under-utilise their talent and performers and/or lose them to more powerful nations. Given that nation-state prestige is at stake in global sport competitions it is no surprise that an international rank order has developed. This ranking of nation-states is reinforced by the status accorded to specific sports, leagues and clubs and, in many instances, are combined with the mutually reinforcing process whereby a (re)branding and marketing of the city, region and nation in which the club is located, occurs.

Activities of this nature also find expression in the investment in mega-events, such as world cup competitions. The reality is that nation-state prestige leads not only to such processes but also investment in specific sports, medals, sport stars and migrants. Consider the investment of the New Zealand Rugby Union in the grounds of its major clubs, the development of the Tri-Nations competition and the Super 12, the re-branding of host cities as tourist destinations and the identification and recruitment of not only “local boys” but also Pacific Islanders – the latter policy arguably denuding those countries of their indigenous talent. Such processes are readily understandable if a real-politic approach to sport and foreign policy is adopted. The projection of “soft power” allows the nation to remain competitive in the international rank order of nations and sports medical industrial complex and has the added advantage of sport acting as a social glue that keeps the nation-state “together”. Wrapping the people and the nation in the flag becomes the unstated norm of state-policy.

Are there/should there be limits to such an approach? A different approach to foreign policy and the use and projection of “soft power” would be to adopt a more ethically based stance. Here, a contribution to UN Millennium Goals and “development through Sport” is relevant. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) have long recognised the role that the British Council and the BBC play in this regard. UK Sport, an arm of the British state, has also noted that in developing sport across the Commonwealth and beyond not only provides access to overseas facilities but also helps promote British sport and influence overseas. Thus, “these development programmes promote expertise in sport and demonstrate the importance of sport as a tool for social development, as well as creating significant goodwill that extends influence abroad”. Invariably, nation-states veer between these polar extremes, often exercising both – with different sectors of the

## Concluding remarks

state apparatus competing for predominance regarding the ethically based or *realpolitik* stance they adopt.

## Concluding remarks

The importance of the topic at hand should not be underestimated and relegated to secondary consideration when formulating and enacting cultural policy in general and foreign policy in particular. In global sport more generally what is at stake is perhaps the most fundamental question facing us as we address globalisation processes – that is, whether globalisation is leading to a more cosmopolitan embrace/emotional identification between people, societies and civilisations or if it has unleashed a new wave of ethnic defensiveness, nationalism and a rejection of other cultures and civilisations. This issue of hostility or friendship, of social capital, of a glue or toxin, of a real politic or ethically-based approach, should also help frame how we make sense of a nation-state's foreign policy stance to sport more generally. And, given the ongoing "peace process" in Ireland, is it possible that athletes from the Irish Republic would once again compete in the Commonwealth games?



## About the author

Joseph Maguire is Professor of Sociology of Sport, Loughborough University. He is Past-President of the International Sociology of Sport Association and is on the Executive Board of the International Council for Sport Science and Physical Education. He is a Visiting Professor at the University of Copenhagen and at the University of the Western Cape. He has received several accolades including Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences; The International Sociology of Sport Association Honorary Member's Award; and, The North American Society for the Sociology of Sport Distinguished Service Award. He has published authored or edited 14 books and has published in a range of international journals. His work focuses on globalisation, examining the Olympics and mega-events, national identity and sport and development. Recent publications include: Reflections on Process Sociology and Sport; Sports Across Asia; Social Sciences in Sport; Sport and Migration; Power and Global Sport; and Japan, Sport and Society.

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## Sport in Foreign Policy

*“International sport competition was marked from the beginning with complex foreign policy implications and concerns”*

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The article gives an overview over central issues, challenges and opportunities in regard to sport in foreign policy.